

President Tadateru Konoé

Event: XIX Inter-American Conference of the Red Cross
Date: 14 March 2012)
Theme: "Reducing the gaps"
Duration: 10 minutes maximum

Mr /Madam Chair, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, friends of the Red Cross and Red Crescent,

It is with great pleasure that I join you here today for the nineteenth Inter-American Conference.

I would like first of all to extend my thanks to the President of the Haiti Red Cross Society, Dr Michaèle Amédée Gédéon, our dearest host for this conference. Also to the members of the Inter-American Regional Committee of the Red Cross, known as CORI, for their hard work in preparing this event.

I am delighted to see the large number of volunteers, especially young people, participating in this conference. You are the lifeblood of our Movement, and I thank you for the time, energy and compassion you bring to your National Societies, and for your commitment to the Fundamental Principles that underpin our humanitarian work.

In the two and a half years of my Presidency, I have had the honour to visit the National Societies of Dominican Republic, Panama, Haiti, Ecuador, United States and, most recently, Mexico. I have not yet had the opportunity to visit other Caribbean National Societies, but I hope to do so in the future. Our recent Statutory Meetings allowed me to meet and talk with many Red Cross leaders from the Americas, and I look forward to the discussions we will have during this conference.

I know that the partnerships between National Societies in this region are strong, and that good progress has also been made to improve and increase collaboration between the Red Cross, governments, intergovernmental agencies and civil society. This is of great importance to National Societies' role as auxiliaries to their governments, and will help to improve response services in a disaster-prone region.

When I visited the secretariat zone office and the Pan-American Disaster Response Unit in Panama two years ago, I was briefed on the regional disaster management system. I was impressed with both the equipment and procedures to prepare for disasters, and the high morale of staff and volunteers. It is very impressive that so many National Societies have played key roles in response to disasters large and small within your countries, and I also commend you for safeguarding the fundamental principles of neutrality and independence.

Much has happened since you last sat together in Ecuador to discuss humanitarian issues in the Americas region, in particular in the country in which we are now meeting.

My visit to Haiti in January 2010 right after the earthquake left me deeply impressed by the leadership of Dr Gédéon and the dedication of Haiti Red Cross staff and volunteers, all of whom worked long, long hours under the most distressing conditions, while themselves grieving for lost loved ones, colleagues and communities.

At their side were volunteers and staff from their sister society, the Dominican Red Cross. The outstanding support provided by this National Society extended far beyond disaster response assistance in those first dreadful weeks. The Dominican Red Cross also provided generous hospitality and logistical support to the countless regional and international Red Cross Red Crescent delegates and teams who became part of our global response operation.

A record one hundred National Societies – the largest number in the IFRC's history - took part, including a very large number of societies from across the Americas. The red cross, red crescent and red crystal emblems were seen in action, side by side, for the first time ever.

Today, with the Haiti earthquake operation well into the recovery stage, many challenges remain and we still have much work to do. But no other current operation continues to exemplify the Spirit of Togetherness in quite the same way. The dedication of the Haitian Red Cross and its international partners, working hand in hand with the affected communities, is a shining example of mutual respect and collective cooperation. When I think of this, I am reminded of the vibrant and life-affirming paintings by the Haitian painter Jean Benet Stiverne, whose depiction of shelters being built serves as inspiration to many.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The commitments you made at the 18th Inter-American Conference in 2008 remain strong, and the evaluation of the implementation of the Plan of Guayaquil has contributed to the approach and the topics of this conference.

Over these three days, we will take the issues debated at Guayaquil – such as disaster management and health – and move them forward within the framework of social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace. We will also address migration, urban violence, and relations with state institutions.

When I first saw the theme “Reducing the gaps”, I first thought of the transition from work in disaster relief to our long term development work, including preparedness, risk reduction and recovery. But other gaps remain, and have to be addressed.

In the Americas, as elsewhere, there is significant inequality, marginalization and social exclusion. Urban violence destroys the lives of countless people and contributes to economic problems across the region. Access to basic services, particularly in health, remains a challenge for governments and increases the vulnerability of millions of people.

The gap between the investment needed for disaster risk reduction and the far higher cost of relief and reconstruction is a serious challenge to sustainable development. This was discussed during our Statutory Meetings, and firm commitments were made to address this.

We have also committed to making all efforts to reduce the digital divide, which is in itself a gap between the ambitions of Strategy 2020 and the current technological capacity of many National Societies.

Social media improves our ability to influence and inform the public and decision makers and, as we have witnessed here in Haiti, information technology has also made beneficiary communications more dynamic. The Red Cross Red Crescent is getting life-saving messages to people via mobile phones, keeping them up to date with our activities and getting their feedback to improve programmes. This has greatly improved our accountability to beneficiaries.

We also need to be accountable to each other, as a network. However, some gaps in understanding still persist. Gaps in communication have many starting points – institutional structures, cultural differences, a reluctance to share information or concerns – but they can all lead to negative consequences for an individual organization or a network.

The IFRC is making it a priority to be more responsive to your requests for assistance and to provide support in a timely manner, but communication is a two way process and we ask that you continue to take an active part in the work of the IFRC.

The National Societies of the Americas, with your long histories, rich experience and dedicated volunteers and staff, have so much to contribute in our shared mission to reduce vulnerability and create a world of peace and tolerance.

I have mentioned our Statutory Meetings and the commitments we have made as the IFRC and as a Movement. I thank you, the National Societies of the Americas, for the leading role you took during those discussions.

I now ask you to continue to lead by example in the implementation of those commitments, and of the promises we will make here in Haiti over the coming days. Please help our network to lift the words from the paper and transform them into life-saving and life-changing action on the ground in your own countries, across the Americas, and across the world.

Let me end wishing you every success in this conference. I am sure that the Inter-American Plan 2012-2016 and the Montrouis Commitment will guide Red Cross humanitarian work for the coming years in your region. I look forward to working with you, in the Spirit of Togetherness, to provide ever greater support to people across the Americas.

Thank you.